

Speaker, this is unacceptable. We must do more to correct this disparity.

HURRICANE KATRINA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. LIPINSKI) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LIPINSKI. Mr. Speaker, the whole country continues to be focused on the millions of Americans who have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina. As we begin to understand the enormity of the situation in the gulf region, it is becoming clear that this is one of the worst natural disasters to ever strike our country. My thoughts and prayers go out to the families grieving the loss of their loved ones and to the survivors who are struggling to cope and to find shelter, food, and medical care in the wake of this terrible disaster.

These are the moments that we realize that we are our brothers' keepers. It is clear that we must all come together to help our fellow citizens. And Americans are donating record amounts of money, time, and supplies to help those who are displaced by the hurricane. The most important thing right now is to make sure that we are saving lives and we are providing the food, shelter, and medical care for the people affected by this tragedy.

As has happened in many other States, four jetliners arrived yesterday in my home State of Illinois with the first group of 540 hurricane evacuees; and Illinois expects to provide housing, food, and medical care for up to 10,000 evacuees.

I am pleased that Congress was called back to Washington last week for a special session to pass the \$10.5 billion in relief funding for the victims of this horrific natural disaster. This funding is only the first step on a long and challenging path to recovery for the entire gulf coast region.

Unfortunately, many of the victims have had to endure not only the natural disaster of Katrina but also the unnatural disaster of the delayed and deeply flawed relief effort. In this time immediately following the disaster, we have an obligation to correct the mistakes in crisis response. We must find answers to basic questions that the American people are asking right now as they watch the aftermath unfolding on their television screens minute by minute and hour by hour. They are saying over and over again to themselves, How could this have happened in the United States of America, the most powerful country on the Earth? How could our country allow people to die without getting them water, food, and medical care?

One thing that is clear is that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, must assume a large share of the blame for the woefully inadequate response to the hurricane. Somehow FEMA has lost its way. During the Clinton administration, FEMA

was transformed into an exemplary and effective cabinet-level agency under the leadership of James Lee Witt, a veteran emergency director. Unfortunately, as part of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the President and Congress moved FEMA from an independent, cabinet-level rank to a sub-agency of the Department of Homeland Security under the authority of the Secretary of Homeland Security.

It is time for us to return FEMA to its status as a cabinet-level agency that reports directly to the President and establish it once again as an independent agency.

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I have signed on to legislation to do this, and I urge my colleagues to quickly and carefully review this bill.

We have important questions to answer about how the Federal Government could have better handled the events that unfolded as a result of this catastrophe. These are serious questions on which we all need to work together. We need to make sure that we are responding quickly not only to those in need today, but also prepare for anything that may happen in the future.

Today, we live under the specter of terrorist attacks, and we may face a situation much worse than we have faced with Katrina. We have to be ready. We have to learn from this catastrophe, from the mistakes and the lack of adequate response, and we have to quickly fix the problems. As we have all too painfully seen, the lives of millions of Americans depend on how we handle this, depend on how FEMA handles these emergencies. So it depends on what we here in Congress do to correct this situation so it never happens again.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S SHAMEFUL RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. REICHTE). Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. LEE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Mr. Speaker, the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina has torn down the curtain and exposed the dirty secret that divides our Nation like an open wound, and the entire world is watching. If anyone ever doubted that there were two Americas, Hurricane Katrina and our government's shameful response have made the division very clear for all to see.

New Orleans is a city where 67 to 70 percent of its population was black. Nearly 30 percent, one in three, were living below the poverty line. Twenty-one percent of the households earned less than \$10,000 a year. Eighty-four percent of the people living in poverty in New Orleans were black.

So when a disaster came such as this one, the people who had cash in the bank and a car in the garage, they es-

caped, and those who did not were shamefully left to fend for themselves, and the majority were poor and black.

The Bush administration's response to Katrina has been nothing short of shameful, and they must account for their actions. Why did Federal officials ignore predictions of a disastrous flood and hurricane in New Orleans? Why did FEMA turn away assistance, telling Amtrak it did not need to help evacuating survivors, denying the Red Cross access to New Orleans, turning away three trailer trucks from Wal-Mart that were loaded with water, and preventing the Coast Guard from delivering 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel?

How many people died as a result of this delayed response? And why has the FEMA budget been cut since 2003? Why have the last two directors of FEMA been political appointees who had no experience with disaster management?

As one commentator recently said, he said, "Actions have consequences. No one could predict that a hurricane the size of Katrina would hit this year, but the slow Federal response when it did happen was no accident. It was the result of 4 years of deliberate Republican policy and budget choices that favor ideology and partisan loyalty at the expense of operational competence. It is the Bush administration in a nutshell."

Quite frankly, the director of FEMA, Michael Brown, should resign immediately, or he should be fired. And we must help put people's lives back together immediately by providing the health care and the housing and the mental health care and the services and the education, all of the basics that people deserve, who live in the wealthiest country in the world.

The incompetence and the indifference demonstrated by the administration in responding to this tragedy was shocking, but it was not really surprising. Does anyone doubt that if this sort of devastation had taken place in the communities where the small percentage of people who are benefiting from the Bush administration tax cuts live, the response would have been swift and efficient? Can you imagine Bush fund-raisers desperately clinging to their roofs, waiting for days to be rescued?

This indifference to the most vulnerable among us is not isolated to this tragedy; it is part and parcel of a systemic problem that seeks to make a large sector of our population invisible.

Many people viewing the human tragedy left in Katrina's wake could not recognize the images that they were seeing. They thought they were witnessing a tragedy in Somalia or Haiti or the Sudan. They think to themselves, they think, this does not look like the America that I know. Some have even come to refer to the survivors of this catastrophe as refugees, as if the image of the survivors they are seeing are too foreign for them to recognize them as Americans.

The people you see on television are not refugees; they are Americans. They